
U.S.

Nation: The Fear & the Facts

17 MINUTE READ

TIME

SEPTEMBER 25, 1964 12:00 AM GMT-4

(See Cover)

A little girl, as pretty as anybody's image of his own daughter, appears on the television screen. She carries an ice cream cone. It certainly looks good enough to eat—but is it? A hoarse, anxious, motherlike voice is heard: "Know what people used to do? They used to explode bombs in the air. You know children should have lots of vitamin A and calcium. But they shouldn't have strontium 90 or cesium 137. These things come from atomic bombs, and they're radioactive. They make you die. Do you know what people finally did? They got together and signed a nuclear test ban treaty. And then the radioactive poison started to go away. But now there's a man who wants to be President of the United States, and he doesn't like this treaty. He fought against it. He even voted against it. He wants to go on testing more bombs. His name is Barry Goldwater. If he's elected, they might start testing all over again."

Another little girl appears on the screen. She is strolling through a pleasant field. She stoops, picks a daisy, starts plucking its petals



TIME

SUBSCRIBE

and stronger, finally drowning out the child's words. The man is counting backward: "Ten, nine, eight . . ." The countdown ends, and the screen erupts in atomic explosion, followed by the voice of Lyndon Baines Johnson, who says somberly: "These are the stakes: to make a world in which all of God's children can live, or go into the dark. We must either love each other or we must die."

These political commercials have recently appeared on television under the sponsorship of the Democratic National Committee. Their obvious implication: if Barry Goldwater is elected President, eating ice cream will be dangerous, and daisy plucking will be a thing of the past.

Vicious? Of course. But the very fact that such commercials are being used speaks mouthfuls about what now stands as the decisive issue of the 1964 presidential campaign—the argument over control of nuclear weaponry.

An Educational Program. That issue is killing Barry Goldwater. He knows it—and so far he has refused to retreat. He has been scalded by Democrats, pickled by pundits, depicted as a monster by cartoonists, scolded by fellow Republicans. But, insists Barry, "I want to educate the American people to lose some of their fear of the word 'nuclear.' When you say 'nuclear,' all the American people

see is a mushroom cloud. Now a nuclear weapon in political terms may be a mushroom cloud. But for military purposes, it's just enough firepower to get the job done."

Lyndon Johnson also realizes the importance of the nuclear issue—and he has exploited it with consummate skill. In his speeches, he constantly uses the words "responsibility" and "restraint." He does not need to mention Goldwater's name: everybody knows who and what he is talking about.

In point of fact, the nuclear issue is one that should be pondered deeply by men everywhere. It certainly has a valid place in any presidential campaign. But so far this year, neither side has fully, accurately, or even honestly explained the basic conflicts involved. As a result there are more confusions and misconceptions about the nuclear issue than about almost any other in recent U.S. political history.

Whose Trigger Finger? What are the facts? Within the context of this year's politics, Goldwater first got himself into nuclear trouble in October of 1963 when, at a Hartford, Conn., press conference, and in his ordinary, offhand fashion, he suggested that NATO "field commanders" (plural) be given greater discretion. about when to use tactical nuclear weapons in the event of attack.

Goldwater later insisted that he had been misquoted, that he was referring only to the supreme commander of NATO. No matter. By then the fat was in the fire. In the New Hampshire presidential primary, New York's Governor Nelson Rockefeller, campaigning against Goldwater, cried: "How can there be sanity when he wants

to give area commanders the authority to make decisions on the use of nuclear weapons?” Goldwater, not quite to the point, retorted that he had never proposed to “let every second lieutenant” make nuclear decisions.

Since then, under mounting criticism, Goldwater has constantly tried to clarify his stand, and has consistently succeeded in confusing it. As of now, the fair exposition of his position would be:

> He would give only NATO’s Supreme Allied Commander in Europe, presently U.S. General Lyman Lemnitzer, any sort of option to use nuclear weapons without direct, specific authorization from the President of the U.S. He has said: “The NATO commander should not be required to wait until the White House calls a conference to decide whether these weapons should be used.”

>The option to Lemnitzer would be to use “only tactical, not strategic” nuclear weapons. Goldwater has” described these tactical “nukes” as “conventional —any weapon carried by an infantryman or a team of infantrymen.” Speaking last month at a Veterans of Foreign Wars convention in Cleveland, he called them “these small, conventional nuclear weapons, which are no more powerful than the firepower you have faced on the battlefield. They simply come in a smaller package.”

Dreaming or Leading? Every time Goldwater has spoken on the nuclear issue, his political critics, both Democratic and Republican, have leaped into the argument. Before the Republican Convention in San Francisco, Pennsylvania’s Governor William Scranton, then running for the G.O.P. presidential nomination himself, asked:

“What does it mean to be a conservative? Does it mean you must be a trigger-happy dreamer in a world that wants from America not slogans but sane leadership?” Again, Scranton said of Goldwater: “He says the decision to unleash nuclear war should be made not by the President but by the commanders in the field.”

In Atlantic City, Democratic Convention Keynoter John Pastore cried that “on the question of whose finger should be on the trigger of the atomic bomb, that power today rests solely with the President of the United States.

That is exactly where it should remain, and we Democrats mean to keep it there ... I am disturbed when I hear anyone speak so glibly and loosely on the use of these weapons and who should make the decision to use them.” The Democratic platform specifically declares: “Control of the use of nuclear weapons must remain solely with the highest elected official in the country—the President of the United States.” Democratic Vice-Presidential Nominee Hubert Humphrey is going around asking audiences: “The question before the electorate is simple, prophetic, profound—which of these men, Lyndon Johnson or Barry Goldwater, do you want to have his hand on the nuclear trigger?” (As against that, G.O.P. Veep Nominee William Miller says that by the time a NATO commander under attack got in touch with Johnson to see if he could use nuclear weapons, it “might be too late if he had to get Lyndon on the phone driving his car at 100 miles an hour in Texas.”)

In Ghastly Hues. Johnson himself conjures up Dr. Strangelove-type images of the “madman” who unleashes nuclear war. He paints a picture of any such war in ghastly hues. Said he in his Detroit Labor

Day speech: “In the first nuclear exchange, 100 million Americans and more than 100 million Russians would be dead. And when it was over, our great cities would be in ashes, and our fields would be barren, and our industry would be destroyed, and our American dreams would have vanished.” Last week, in Seattle, Lyndon upped his casualty figures to 300 million, not including “unborn generations forever maimed.” Without ever precisely saying so, he gives the strong impression that he will never let any such catastrophe happen by reason of having delegated an iota of his authority to anyone, including a NATO commander.

Does the President of the U.S. really believe that 100 million of his countrymen would be killed in “the first exchange”? If so, it would be only minimum prudence, not to say Christian charity and perhaps even good politics, for him to begin immediately the greatest shelter-building program imaginable, to save possibly 1%, or 1,000,000, of the doomed.

Ignorance & Inaccuracy. Between the opposing positions on control over the use of nuclear weapons, there is a vast area of ignorance—or, to use the kindest word, inaccuracy.

There is a general supposition that U.S. law requires that the signal for use of any sort of nuclear weaponry must come directly from the President. There is no such provision in the law. The Atomic Energy Act of 1946, as amended, in its most relevant clause provides only that the President may direct the Atomic Energy Commission “to deliver such quantities of special nuclear material or atomic weapons to the Department of Defense for such use as he deems necessary in the interest of national defense.”

Of course, the President, in his constitutional role as Commander in Chief of the armed forces, has final responsibility for all matters pertaining to the national defense. But he can, must, and in countless ways does delegate his authority every day of his White House life. There is nothing whatever in the law to prevent him from delegating to, say, a NATO commander, authority to use nuclear weapons under certain circumstances.

Never Any Doubt. Goldwater insists that the President should delegate such authority. Johnson lets on that he can't and won't. The fact is that he already does, as did Presidents Eisenhower and Kennedy before him. In 1957, the congressional Joint Committee on Atomic Energy received written notification that plans were being developed to give NATO's supreme commander in Europe the right to use nuclear weapons in certain contingencies—such as the incapacity of the President or the breakdown of communications between Europe and the U.S.

Those plans are now in operation. All are classified top secret, but they apply not only to NATO's commander, but to the commander of the North American Air Defense. Some are written, but word-of-mouth communication between the President and the NATO commander is also important. Former NATO Commander Lauris Norstad, for example, never had any doubt about his authority to act in the event of an attack on Western Europe during the Cuba missile crisis of 1962: he could use his tactical atomic weaponry.

Said Norstad in a recent conversation with a friend: "In every crisis that arose under President Eisenhower and President Kennedy, there never was a time when I felt that there was any possibility of

lack of complete meeting of the minds between the President and the Supreme Commander as to what should be done in an emergency.”

“Dangerously Misleading.” Goldwater shows appalling ignorance when he intimates that there are atomic weapons so small and well-packaged that they can be carried around by an infantryman, and that these weapons do not really have much more explosive power than some of the gunpowder arms of World War II. The fact is that the U.S.’s smallest operational nuclear weapon, the Davy Crockett, carries a minimum power package equivalent to 40 tons of TNT—as opposed to World War II’s powerful “blockbuster” bomb, which packed an explosive load of about 15 tons.

The Davy Crockett, a recoilless rifle, comes in two sizes, one weighing 116 lbs., the other 371 lbs., and can be fired from a tripod by a crew of three men. With a range of up to 2½ miles, the Davy Crockett can annihilate a dug-in infantry battalion, wipe out a massed formation of 45 to 50 tanks, or destroy a huge bridge. Two versions of the 155-mm. howitzer—one a towed weapon weighing 12,700 lbs., and the other a self-propelled weapon weighing 54,200 lbs.—fire an explosive load of 40 to 100 tons up to 11.2 miles. Beyond that, the punch of the Army’s tactical nuclear weaponry scales rapidly upward. The 12.7-mile-range Little John rocket carries a power package of over 20 kilotons; the 24.2-mile Honest John 100 to 150 kilotons; the 135-mile Sergeant over 100 kilotons; and the 400-mile Pershing, largest of the Army’s “tactical” nuclear weapons, over 200 kilotons. Thus the Johnson Administration’s Deputy Defense Secretary, Cyrus R. Vance, has a real point when he says of some of Goldwater’s statements: ” ‘Small’ and ‘conventional’

are dangerously misleading and totally inappropriate when applied to any nuclear weapon.”

Crossing the “Fire Break.” The Administration’s fear of firing any sort of nuclear weapon is based largely on the so-called “fire break” theory. That theory holds that the single step from use of the largest gunpowder weapon to use of the smallest tactical nuclear weapon would mean crossing the “fire break” area between limited war and all-out, intercontinental, thermonuclear disaster. Says Vance: “Once you use any nuclear device, no matter how small, you move completely into another world.”

Yet the fact is that since 1954, NATO itself has based its defense planning, even against conventional attack, on “using atomic weapons from the outset of a war.” In a mere gunpowder war, NATO planners estimate that their forces could withstand a massive Soviet attack for a bare three days before being forced back to the banks of the Rhine; within 30 days the NATO troops would be swept from the Continent.

Some Strange Blips. Goldwater argues that such critical-area commanders as NATO’s Lemnitzer should be given atomic discretion because there is always the possibility that a communications breakdown might consume vital hours before word of a crisis got to Washington. Defense Secretary Robert McNamara’s civilian Pentagon says that argument is nonsense, boasts of a worldwide U.S. communications setup that could put a commander in touch with the President within two minutes under any conceivable circumstances.

Last week Goldwater's point received new credibility. The Pentagon went into a headline-screaming flap over reports of another Tonkin Gulf incident. U.S. destroyers in the area reported seeing strange blips on their radar screens, assumed a new attack by North Vietnamese PT boats, started firing. But, if only because of the confusion existing on the destroyers, communication with the Pentagon failed to make clear what actually was happening.

It was a full 28 hours before a tight-lipped McNamara appeared before newsmen to read a 146-word communiqué and refused to entertain any questions. Gist of his statement: two unnamed U.S. destroyers "were menaced" by four "unidentified vessels" and opened fire, after which the "vessels" disappeared.

Between the original alarm and the denouement, Goldwater seized upon the opportunity to deride the communications system. Snorted Barry: "With the great communications system which McNamara is always bragging about, they are waiting for an airmail letter to find out just what did happen."

Planning to Share. Another element of nuclear "control" has to do with the sharing of nuclear weapons by the U.S. and its NATO allies. Under present law, the U.S. cannot turn over any of its nukes to any ally to be fired at the ally's discretion. But the NATO allies feel strongly that they should have more than nominal influence over the use of the U.S. nuclear weapons that are, after all, their only real defense against Communist invasion.

The dilemma is one that Goldwater seeks to solve with some rather fuzzy talk about "sharing." Says he: "All NATO forces stationed in

Europe, regardless of nationality, should be equipped and trained in the use of nuclear weapons, particularly of the so-called battlefield, or tactical, variety.” Goldwater has been criticized for this stand, and last week in Seattle, President Johnson, even while admitting that “the dignity and interests of our allies demand that they share nuclear responsibility,” warned against the fearful possibility of “nuclear spread.”

Yet despite the fact that Goldwater is suffering political damage from his talk about “sharing,” the possibility of doing just that has been discussed by NATO-nation leaders for years. The so-called Multilateral Force, first formally promulgated by President Kennedy, is one effort to solve the problem. Under the MLF plan, atom-armed surface ships and submarines would be manned by mixed crews from all the NATO nations, and any one of those nations would have a veto power over a decision to fire a nuclear weapon.

As of now, the structure of MLF is still being negotiated, and the plan does not seem likely to go much farther. Last week a new and far more sophisticated “sharing” plan was proposed by NATO’s onetime Commander Norstad (see box).

Deterrent by Declaration. The most obvious proposition in the debate over the use and control of nuclear weapons is that no one wants a nuclear war. Despite all the hot words, this is as true of Goldwater as of Johnson.

Goldwater believes that the best deterrent to such a war is a clear and well-understood declaration that the U.S. will, if necessary,

defend its vital international interests with nuclear weaponry. In urging this point, he has indulged in some imprecise language.

He has helped create for himself the political image of a man who would consider using atomic weapons to “defoliate” trees in South Viet Nam so as to deprive Communist guerrillas of their protective jungle cover. He has been mistaken in saying that the smallest nuclear weapon is no more powerful than World War II artillery charges. He has, in many ways, given the impression of a man who does not really know what he is talking about, and should not, therefore, be permitted to put his atomic ignorance into effect as national policy.

Johnson, superb politician that he is, has taken advantage of almost everything Goldwater has said. Campaigning for re-election as the great peace keeper, he keeps invoking “national security” as a brake on what he can say. But he has not said all he could, and he has indulged in some imprecision himself. He gets across the notion, for instance, that Goldwater is irresponsible and reckless because he has suggested that NATO’s supreme commander ought to be given some sort of contingency authority for using tactical nuclear weapons—at a time when General Lemnitzer, under a delegation of power from Johnson, has just such authority.

One Billion Tons. Will the nuclear issue be clarified, and cooled off, before election day? Perhaps too much has already been said, and badly said at that, by the two candidates, for them ever to engage in meaningful debate.

Just last week Russia's Nikita Khrushchev told some visiting Japanese that the Soviet Union has perfected a sensational new weapon "that is a means of the destruction and extermination of humanity."

What was the weapon? Was it what famed U.S. Physicist Ralph Lapp calls a "gigaton" bomb—a nuclear weapon packing the power of a billion tons of TNT that could be detonated 100 miles off the U.S.'s coastline and still set off a 50-ft. tidal wave that would sweep across much of the entire North American continent? Was it a cobalt bomb that would send a deadly cloud sweeping forever about the earth? A "death ray" or a germ bomb? Or even an empty boast? Two days later Nikita Khrushchev said it wasn't nuclear, and, besides, he had been misinterpreted. For public consumption, his weapon had been cooled off.

It was quite a performance, and one that only a dictator could bring off. But, as one U.S. journalist warned, it would be "struthious"* folly to ignore the implications of what Khrushchev said. In the same sense, it would be struthious for the U.S. electorate to base its November judgment on the notion that either presidential candidate has discussed the nuclear control issue accurately or fully.

*Ostrichlike.

MORE MUST-READS FROM TIME

- **Cybersecurity Experts** Are Sounding the Alarm on DOGE
- Meet the **2025 Women of the Year**